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SUBJECT: SERBIAN VOTERS TURN OUT IN RECORD NUMBERS TO REELECT
PRESIDENT

Summary

¶1. (U) Record numbers of voters on both sides of a deeply polarized electorate headed to the polls February 3 to elect Serbia's next president, choosing Democratic incumbent Boris Tadic over his Radical Party opponent Tomislav Nikolic. Preliminary results put Tadic 100,000 votes ahead of Nikolic, and the Tadic camp declared victory. Final results will come later, but it appears certain that voters opted for Tadic's promise of a prosperous European future. Embassy teams traveling throughout Serbia reported steady flows of voters at polling stations, energized and optimistic campaign staffs at party headquarters, few polling station irregularities before the end of the vote, and no certainty about who would win. The votes are still coming in and the results are expected to be close, quite possibly too close to call today. Post's analysis of the numeric results of the election outcome will follow septel on February 4. This cable will report on election atmospherics and observations from the field. End summary.

Number Crunching

¶2. (U) Serbia's presidential runoff, February 3, drew an apparent record turnout. Serbia's Center for Free Elections and Democracy (CeSID) estimated that over 4.4 million voters or 68% of the total eligible voters had cast ballots. By 5pm in the count had already exceeded by 300 thousand the total votes cast in the 2004 runoff between the same candidates. CeSID told emboff before the polls closed that the last hours of voting that he witnessed an "explosion of voting." Only strong participation of voters from the Liberal Democratic opposition party and DS coalition partners New Serbia and the Democratic Party of Serbia, he said, could account for such numbers. (Note: This is ironic, considering their leader's weak support for Tadic during the campaign.)

¶3. (U) Early in the day, Radical Party General Secretary Vucic told one ceSID official that he anticipated 4.2 million votes would give the election to Tadic. Conventional wisdom likewise says that good weather (like on this election day) and high turnout would favor Tadic, on the assumption that the Radicals have an upper ceiling of 2.1 million votes. But if recent experience has contradicted informed wisdom on the matter of Serbian elections, it has taught that there is no guessing either the Radicals' upper limit or what will bring the Democrats to the polls. Emboffs who called on Radical headquarters, in Belgrade and throughout Serbia, in the late afternoon noted that the party members looked anxious and heard that Vucic had canceled a television interview.

Meet the Radicals

¶4. (U) Outside Belgrade early in the day, the Radical Party (SRS) was generally more confident. Post used the opportunity of this election to increase our exposure to the Radicals and theirs to us. Several Embassy teams reported the Radicals' surprise to receive us

in their headquarters, but, with a few exceptions, the SRS party workers were willing to share their enthusiasm about the election and concerns about the future. In Kursumlija, a town where 50% of the residents are from Kosovo, polling station officials from both parties worked well together, were well organized, and friendly to Embassy visitors. Just outside the central Serbia city of Nis, in Novo Selo, a small town built around a large maximum-security prison, they were less welcoming. The Novo Selo polling place had opened late to allow DS officials to remove Nikolic posters that had gone up overnight on the wall of the polling station. A CeSID observer told Embassy's team that the SRS chairman of the station had had barred him from the station for an hour, until a call from Belgrade gained him access. The polling chairperson had warned that he would not allow U.S. or UK observers to enter. The threat proved idle. While he did not talk to the U.S. personnel, he did not attempt to prevent them from entering.

15. (U) Embassy's team received a cold reception at the SRS headquarters in the southern city of Vranje. The SRS campaign workers accused the Democratic Party (DS) of "buying votes" with care packages for the needy in nearby poor villages. The SRS main concern, however, was that the United States might not recognize an SRS victory. They said that the USG had supported the Democratic Party challenge of vote manipulation in the 1990s (referring to Milosevic's attempt to falsify the results and steal the 1996 election) and that the United States would do the same on their behalf in this election.

16. (U) Radicals in Novi Pazar, the capital of the majority Muslim Sandzak region, took the opportunity of their first meeting with Americans to blame the USG for Serbia's troubles with Kosovo. Where the USG meddles, "there is trouble," they said. Moving beyond Kosovo, the SRS principal concerns were corruption and the divisiveness of Sandzak's Islamic communities -- a rift, they said, that promoted the growth of Islamic fundamentalism. In the smaller,

BELGRADE 00000132 002.2 OF 002

Radical-dominated villages near Novi Pazar, the turnout was steady, if small, and the reception hospitable. In the mountain town of Sjenica, which the Bosnian Muslim residents (and presumed DS voters) claimed was the coldest town in Europe, representatives of the NGO FLORES also identified the political tension between Muslim groups as their biggest worry.

Few Election Irregularities

17. (U) There were few reports of election irregularities and none that would affect the outcome of the election. National media reported "an incident" in the south Serbia town of Bujanovac. Poloff in the vicinity, inquiring further, determined that the matter involved a man casting a ballot for his wife, who waited outside the polling station. DS MP Nenad Konstantinovic told us that in Prokuplje, near the Kosovo border, voting ceased temporarily in one station when the SRS pollwatcher was observed handing three ballots to a voter. A subsequent count of the ballots in the box against the number of individuals having voted oddly showed five ballots missing. Konstantinovic also said that he expected the Radicals to challenge up to four thousand ballots in one town of voters, who had been unable to produce their identification number and been allowed to vote. (Konstantinovic maintained that election law permitted this.)

Counting Concerns

18. (U) Rumors are rampant that the Radicals might disrupt the vote count if it appeared they were doing poorly. Vojvodina Social Democratic Party leader Nenad Canak told poloff that the Tadic camp would declare victory by 10pm, regardless of the official announcement, to get the jump on the Radicals. Canak expressed concern that, if the SRS filed a large number of complaints contesting the outcome, the National Election Commission the (RIK) might be unable to respond within the requisite 48 hours. In that case, he said, there would be a second runoff election and an opportunity for the SRS to increase their turnout.

Comment

Immediately following the announcement of preliminary results, a commentator on Radio Television Serbia Channel 1, asked what the election proved, replied that it proved that Kosovo is a dead issue.

The large turnout also demonstrated Serbian citizen's awareness of the high stakes in this election. Although the majority of Serbians chose a reformist leader who would take them west, there is obviously an enormous segment of the population that would have chosen otherwise. They will remain a force to be reckoned with by Serbia's democratic parties (with help from their U.S. and European friends), who must address their interests and prevent them from leading Serbia astray or stalling Serbia's progress. End Comment
MUNTER